

“The Finest Thing in the World a Happy Healthy Family”: Eugenics, Motherhood, and Advertising in the United States, 1910-1935

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In 1924, an advertisement appeared in the *Ladies' Home Journal* declaring “[t]he finest thing in the world a happy healthy family”¹ (Figure 1). Featuring a cozy domestic tableau of a middle-class mother, her husband, and four small children gathered around a kitchen table, this advertisement for Lifebuoy brand soap—ostensibly narrated by a “health doctor”—describes the illustrated family in terms that can only be characterized as gushing: “I simply cannot find the words to express the emotions aroused by this lovely picture,” the accompanying text reads. “The original painting is before me as I write—I wish it could hang in every American home.” Certainly, given both the time period and the advertisement’s intended audience, such an overt celebration of heteronormative domesticity is not surprising. However, a closer inspection of the ad demonstrates something much more telling. According to a small section of text, America was not only the world’s healthiest nation, its people were also the “best-looking,” because “twenty million mothers are preserving family health by fighting dirt.” In explicitly linking motherhood to both nationalist rhetoric and consumption of branded, mass-produced items, this advertisement reveals a number of connections between consumerism, gender roles, and the eugenic ideology that had become so prevalent during this period of upheaval and anxiety.

By the time this advertisement was printed, the United States had shed its rural and agrarian roots to become a society characterized by rapid urban and industrial growth. Alongside the closing of the frontier, increasing rates of immigration, and

¹ Lifebuoy advertisement, 1924, *Ladies' Home Journal*.

shifting gender roles that saw more women become active in the public sphere, these changes had created a great deal of anxiety among the dominant white bourgeois class about the survival of the family and the so-called “American race.”² As historian Laura Lovett has observed, Americans’ worries were twofold: many believed that changes in “women’s morals, dress, and behavior” that took place around the turn of the twentieth century had put motherhood and family at risk, and they also feared that ostensible “American values” were in danger as new immigrants from Asia and southern and eastern Europe “failed to adopt American traditions as their own.”³ In a period characterized by such profound changes, questions were raised about who—or what—could be considered authentically “American,” and whether or not it was possible to preserve a racialized national ideal.

Using this Lifebuoy advertisement as an entry point to examine these concerns more closely, this paper will look toward print advertisements that appeared in a variety of mass-market publications between 1910 and 1935. More specifically, my analysis will focus on advertisements that were obviously targeted toward mothers (and also to those containing more general references to motherhood or to the family) in order to show how advertisers drew upon positive eugenic ideology to encourage consumption among American women.⁴ By presenting a type of aspirational “eugenic ideal” associated with middle-class white femininity, this era’s advertising for consumer products like food and toiletries also reflected broader cultural concerns about race, notions of modernity, and

² As Lovett points out, references to the so-called “American race” by the era’s reformers, politicians, and social commentators concerned the white population of the United States, ideally those of western and northern European and Anglo-Saxon descent; Laura L. Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 7.

³ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 7.

⁴ For the sake of clarity, it is important to note that this paper focuses exclusively on positive (as opposed to negative) eugenics.

shifting gender roles.⁵ In essence, this paper will demonstrate how mainstream American consumer culture during this period was a space where women's roles—particularly as they pertained to the eugenic discourse of motherhood—were represented, negotiated, and reinforced.

While there are significant bodies of historical scholarship on both the impact of this advertising-driven consumer culture and on eugenic ideology in the United States, it is only fairly recently that Americanists have looked toward the connections between the two.⁶ However, much of the work that explores the relationship between eugenics and popular culture has focused on the “Better Baby” and “Fitter Family” contests that became commonplace at state fairs by the 1920s.⁷ A notable exception to this can be found in art historian Christina Cogdell's work. Her 2004 book *Eugenic Design* examines the relationship between eugenics and the streamline style of industrial design that gained prominence in 1930s America. She argues that “the stamp of eugenic ideology” could be felt “upon the material culture of the decade,” and includes some relevant discussion on the role played by advertising in this.⁸ It is her work that raises the idea of an aspirational “eugenic ideal” that was presented to white middle class consumers by advertisers: “By promoting the ownership of modern products and hygienic design as a natural part of

⁵ The term “eugenic ideal” comes from art historian Christina Cogdell's work on the relationship between eugenics and industrial design in 1930s America; Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 178.

⁶ A comprehensive overview of the historiography in this wide-ranging area of study—including the recent turn toward looking to the connections between eugenics and popular culture—can be found in Wendy Kline, “Eugenics in the United States,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, eds. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 511-522.

⁷ These contests used “scientific” techniques to judge both children's physical health and the hereditary records of families. More information about them can be found in Erica Bicchieri Boudreau, “Yea, I Have a Goodly Heritage,” *Journal of Family History* 30, no. 4 (October 2005): 366-387, and Susan J. Pearson, “‘Infantile Specimens’: Showing Babies in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Social History* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 341-370.

⁸ Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 5.

membership in the eugenic elite, advertisers furthered the redemptive mission shared by eugenicists to elevate the nation's cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic standards to 'civilized' ideals."⁹ However, Cogdell addresses advertising as a smaller part in a more wide-ranging study, and her work does not discuss motherhood in any great detail.

In order to further incorporate this key element into my research, I have looked toward works by Americanists who have focused on the relationship between motherhood, visions of progress, and positive eugenics. For example, Laura Lovett's work on pronatalism provides a detailed overview of the eugenic ideal that was centered upon gender roles that cast women primarily as wives and mothers. Calling attention to the period's "nostalgic modernism" that romanticized agrarianism and promoted scientific racism and eugenics, Lovett argues that "[m]odernist reformers embraced the possibility of social change, but their future society was created in the image of an idealized past."¹⁰ Much like a number of the era's advertisements themselves, these eugenicist reformers emphasized the idea of "modernity" in order to reinforce ideals that were actually quite traditional.¹¹ As well, texts like Wendy Kline's *Building a Better Race* indicate how powerful eugenics—especially positive eugenics—were in shaping ideas about gender, sexuality, and the family throughout much of the twentieth century. Finally, the historiography on advertising in the United States offers some indication on how eugenic ideology might fit in with the country's nascent consumer culture and its efforts to help Americans adapt to the era's broad social and cultural changes. By

⁹ Ibid., 178, 180.

¹⁰ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 10.

¹¹ As an example, consider a 1925 advertisement for Pepsodent toothpaste that focuses on the "important discoveries" made by "modern science" about the care of teeth and gums. In spite of this emphasis on what is "new," and "changing," the advertisement's overt appeal to mothers and imagery of a mother embracing her daughter reflects the still-dominant notion that women's primary responsibilities were as maternal caregivers. Pepsodent advertisement, 1925, *Boston Post*.

attempting to bridge some of the gaps between these bodies of scholarship, this paper represents an effort to place advertising and consumerism more firmly into the broader historical discussion about eugenics, modernity, and motherhood in early-to-mid twentieth century America.

To explore in greater detail how positive eugenic ideology was represented in American advertising in this time period, I will begin by providing a broad overview of eugenic thought in the United States, while emphasizing the differences between positive and negative eugenics. I will then place my research into its proper historical context by examining both the history of eugenic ideology and the rise of modern advertising in the United States. Next I will explain my theoretical and methodological approach as it has been informed by visual semiotics and the work of historians like Roland Marchand, whose seminal 1985 book *Advertising the American Dream* considers advertisements as historically significant documents. Finally, I will provide a more detailed analysis of the advertisements themselves in order to illustrate how they relate to positive eugenic ideology and ideals associated with motherhood during this period. Though I consulted with an array of print advertisements while conducting research for this paper, in the interest of space I have chosen to focus my discussion on four specific examples of advertisements for consumer products that demonstrate these connections particularly well.

Rising to prominence in the United States during the Progressive Era (a period generally acknowledged by historians to span the years 1890 to 1920), scholars have often pointed out how difficult it is to firmly define eugenic ideology. But as many have observed, its overarching emphasis on societal improvement and state regulation tie in

well with the ideology of the aforementioned Progressive Era, a complex notion in itself that advocated various reforms and “represented a widespread and varied response to the multitude of changes brought by industrial capitalism and urban growth.”¹² Indeed, a landmark 1982 article by Daniel T. Rodgers acknowledges the elusive nature of Progressivism, describing it as three distinct but overlapping “languages of discontent” that promulgated antimonopolist rhetoric, calls for social harmony, and demands for efficiency.¹³ He writes that these three languages “did not add up to a coherent ideology”; rather it is more beneficial to think of them as a flexible—and often fragmented—approach to enacting social change and regulation through state intervention.¹⁴ In drawing upon these loosely connected and occasionally contradictory threads, Progressives were able to use these discourses in different ways and for different (and sometimes opposing) purposes.

As I have alluded, eugenic ideology in the United States was as fragmentary as the Progressive movement in which it flourished. Historian Wendy Kline points out that it “comprised a complex combination of popular scientific beliefs and interests,” which thereby appealed to an array of reformers representing “a wide range of interests and politics, who applied their own varied definitions of eugenics.”¹⁵ By the 1920s, eugenicist beliefs and policies were firmly entrenched in the United States, albeit in a quite divergent manner. In looking at some of the policies and initiatives that grew out of this ideology, it is possible to see the widespread (and varied) impact of eugenics in a United

¹² Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 13.

¹³ Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Review in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1982): 123.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 13.

States that was especially fixated on notions of progress and modernity. For examples of eugenics-based policy and legislation, one can look to the 1907 passing of the world's first involuntary sterilization law in Indiana, or the federal Immigration Act of 1924, which was aimed at restricting immigrants of ethnic backgrounds that were considered undesirable. As well, organizations like the Children's Bureau and the American Eugenics Society were established to promote eugenic ideology across the country.¹⁶ Moreover, the influence of eugenics on popular culture becomes apparent when looking at the aforementioned "Better Baby" and "Fitter Family" state fair contests. However, it is important to note that eugenicist beliefs and policies were in no way exclusive to the United States. As the vast body of historiography summarized in *The Oxford Handbook of Eugenics* indicates, eugenics movements can be found in the histories of a large and diverse array of countries.¹⁷

In the Anglo-American context, eugenic ideology was rooted in the work of British scientist Francis Galton, who coined the term "eugenics" in 1883 from a Greek word that meant "good in birth."¹⁸ With a belief that selective breeding would strengthen the human race, Galton's use of this term was meant to "denote both the science and the practice of improving human stock 'to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable.'"¹⁹ Many of the suggestions he

¹⁶ Founded in 1903, Lovett describes the Children's Bureau as "a government clearinghouse for information on child hygiene and rearing." Furthermore, the American Eugenics Society arose in 1921 and "emphasized education and the promotion of eugenics in American society more than scientific research." A more comprehensive discussion of these and other prominent eugenicist organizations can be found in Lovett, "Fitter Families for Future Firesides," in *Conceiving the Future*, 131-161.

¹⁷ An overview of eugenics movements around the world can be found in See Philippa Levine and Alison Bashford, "Introduction: Eugenics and the Modern World," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3-24.

¹⁸ Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 13.

¹⁹ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "Galton, Sir Francis (1822-1911)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eds. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman,

advocated (such as tax schemes to encourage certain people to marry and have large families) were associated with what academics have since described as “positive eugenics,” which according to Laura Lovett “sought to promote reproduction among those considered to be ‘fit.’”²⁰ To contrast, negative eugenics was characterized by measures like “voluntary and involuntary sterilization, segregation of the supposedly ‘unfit,’ immigration and marriage restriction, and euthanasia.”²¹

As I have suggested, a significant part of the appeal of eugenic ideology was tied to fears associated with immigration.²² Scientific texts like 1918’s *Applied Eugenics* tackle these anxieties head on. Co-written by a professor and the editor of the *Journal of Heredity* (which was a publication associated with the American Genetic Association), a chapter on immigration in this particular text details at length the many uncertainties surrounding the presence of newcomers in the United States. These fears were especially palpable in their discussion of immigrants from countries that were considered undesirable.²³ As the authors write, “[t]he effects of the immigration then depends on whether the immigrants are better or worse in average quality than the older residents. If as good or better, they are valuable additions; if inferior they are biologically a detriment.”²⁴ Furthermore, they tie immigration to America’s apparent destiny: “[T]he duty of the United States is to make itself strong, efficient, productive, and progressive.

October 2005, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/33315> (accessed March 30, 2013). Here, Cowan is quoting from Galton’s 1883 book, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*.

²⁰ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 9.

²¹ Ibid.

²² It was also linked to white racism directed toward black Americans, especially in the South. However, I will not discuss this aspect at great length because the inherent complexity and associated regionalism go beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, as Cogdell notes, advertisers largely did not target blacks because they did not consider them to be part of “modernity”; Cogdell, *Eugenic Design*, 180.

²³ In particular, the authors discuss at length the apparent perils of “Oriental immigration”; Paul Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson, *Applied Eugenics* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1918), 312-316.

²⁴ Ibid., 299.

By so doing they will be much better able to help the rest of the world than by progressively weakening themselves through failure to regulate immigration.”²⁵ In other words, if the country could not “slow down the flood of immigrants who are not easily assimilable,” it would become unable to maintain its sense of superiority and influence on the global stage.²⁶

But these anxieties were not limited to this context—when rising immigration rates were coupled with falling birth rates among white, “native-born” citizens, a highly racialized pronatalist discourse also became a dominant force within mainstream American culture.²⁷ Consider, for instance, president Theodore Roosevelt’s fears that white Americans’ seeming reluctance to reproduce would lead to “race suicide.”²⁸ A term coined in 1901 by sociologist Edward A. Ross, “race suicide” was also linked to “broader fears about effeminacy, overcivilization, and racial decadence.”²⁹ Cultural commentators like these two men linked race suicide to masculinity, arguing that the same “manly self-denial” that had allowed the apparently superior white race to prosper now also threatened its survival: in the wake of increasing economic competition from nonwhite men seen to be racially inferior (which included both immigrants and African-Americans), there were fears that white men’s wages would go down and their families’ standards of living would fall with them.³⁰ As historian Gail Bederman describes it, concerns then mounted that there would be fewer and fewer births among the “desirable”

²⁵ Ibid., 317.

²⁶ Ibid., 306.

²⁷ According to data cited by Wendy Kline, the white birth rate in the United States had experienced a precipitous decline by the turn of the twentieth century: “[T]he average American family of 1840 had produced six children, that of 1900 generated only three.” Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 11.

²⁸ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 199-206.

²⁹ Ibid., 200.

³⁰ Ibid.

white ethnic groups: “Unwilling to sire children they could not provide for...American men would ‘quietly and uncomplainingly eliminate’ themselves.”³¹ The stakes appeared to be high if white men were unable to compete with men from racial groups that were considered to be inferior and primitive.

Fears of race suicide were also linked to the changing roles of middle and upper-middle-class women. Prior to this period, the so-called “Cult of True Womanhood” reigned supreme as an ideal.³² Predicated on the notion of separate spheres for men and women, it emerged during the mid-nineteenth century largely as a reaction to Britain and North America’s new urban industrial capitalist economy. In this context, more and more people lived in cities and worked outside the home in offices, stores, factories, and workshops—as the line between the home and the workplace became more clearly drawn, gender roles grew polarized.³³ While men were expected to participate in economic and political life in the public arena, bourgeois women were placed firmly within the private domain of the home where they were expected to fulfill traditional duties as wives and mothers. Indeed, the home itself was now regarded with utmost reverence as a refuge from the pressures of the outside world: “[T]he home was practically deified. It became a sanctuary, a temple of virtue, a ‘divine institution.’”³⁴ The woman was the moral guardian at the centre of this quasi-sacred space, responsible for ensuring that it was a calm and nurturing environment for her husband and family.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Barbara Welter’s classic 1966 journal article delineates this ideal in more detail; see Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* vol. 18 (1966): 151-174.

³³ Ibid., 151.

³⁴ Lori Anne Loeb, *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 18.

But as women became more involved in public life by the turn of the century, this deeply ingrained domestic ideology began to lose its allure. Middle and upper-middle class women became increasingly vocal about their desire for new opportunities—after all, this was the age that saw women begin to argue for greater access to education and employment outside the home, and it also marked the emergence of the suffrage movement.³⁵ By the 1890s and into the twentieth century, the upheaval surrounding prescribed female roles was embodied in a cultural archetype that became known as the “new woman.” A symbol of female discontent, the “new woman” was independent and often politically conscious and career-minded—she argued that the notion of separate spheres set out by the “Cult of True Womanhood” was culturally rather than naturally constructed, and she demanded that women be allowed the same rights, privileges, and opportunities as those enjoyed by men.³⁶ To many men, this was cause for alarm: by calling into question the sanctity of gender roles, the “new woman” created a sort of moral panic. As historian Wendy Kline observes, “[w]omen were becoming masculine just as men were becoming increasingly weak and effeminate. Home and family were the cornerstone of society, and if women abdicated their domestic duties, what was to become of moral order?”³⁷

Though the alarmism was strong, race suicide was depicted as a danger that could be overcome through “willful procreative effort.”³⁸ To address these anxieties, Roosevelt and others drew upon a positive eugenicist discourse, encouraging white Americans to

³⁵ According to Kline, American women’s enrollment in universities tripled between 1890 and 1910, and by 1920 they made up nearly fifty percent of the university population. Furthermore, the median age of women at marriage went from twenty-one in 1860 to twenty-four by 1890; Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 10, 12.

³⁶ Carolyn Christensen Nelson, introduction to *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s*, ed. Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), p. ix.

³⁷ Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

reproduce and advocating for an idealized vision of the family that emphasized and reinforced women's roles as wives and mothers. As Roosevelt wrote in a 1902 letter, those who did not wish to have children should be considered "in effect, a criminal against the race." Furthermore, he believed that women "must recognize that the greatest thing for any woman is to be a good wife and mother."³⁹ These attitudes are also reflected in scientific and prescriptive literature. For instance, consider a 1924 book by Albert Edward Wiggam, a doctor and widely published medical writer from Indiana. Titled *The Fruit of the Family Tree*, this text discusses the era's eugenic science and it examines "woman's place in race improvement."⁴⁰ In arguing that women are "the natural conservator of the race, the guardian of its blood," Wiggam draws heavily from positive eugenic ideology.⁴¹ He explicitly states that eugenics was concerned with building the "health, strength, and character of the next generation," as opposed to "killing off the weaklings" or "breeding human beings like animals."⁴² The book also contains a chapter titled "Can We Make Motherhood Fashionable?," which suggests there was an imperative to make motherhood seem again like an attractive option for bourgeois white American women in an era of changing gender roles and falling birth rates. After all, these women were now considered central figures in the evolution of the race.⁴³

As the era's advertisements for consumer products indicate, America's newly emergent mass consumer culture played a crucial—and under-explored—role in promoting motherhood and the eugenic ideal amidst these widespread fears. Consider, for

³⁹ As quoted in Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 202.

⁴⁰ Albert Edward Wiggam, "Woman's Place in Race Improvement," in *The Fruit of the Family Tree* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1924), 280-303.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 282-283.

⁴³ Kline notes that this emphasis on women existed in opposition to the late nineteenth century, when the discourse of civilization cast white men as the saviors of the race: "As the 'mother of tomorrow,' [white women] controlled the racial makeup of future generations." Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 8.

instance, another advertisement for Lifebuoy soap that appeared in the *Ladies' Home Journal* during the 1920s (Figure 2). A blatantly nationalistic celebration of the idealized American family, this advertisement depicts an image of three smiling, rosy-cheeked, and well-dressed white children running outdoors in the sunlight and greenery toward their beaming mother. The tagline proclaims, "Why America wins Olympics," and the copy echoes themes often found in the era's prescriptive literature and cultural texts like 1917's *Woman and Social Progress*, which emphasized the overarching role of mothers in determining "in a very real sense what the qualities of the race of the future shall be."⁴⁴ As the authors of this work assert, "[i]f women of high qualities choose men of high qualities, the offspring will have high qualities; but if they mate haphazardly, there can be no guarantee that the qualities of the future will be a whit superior to those of the present."⁴⁵ To compare, this Lifebuoy advertisement also presents the idea that women shouldered the primary responsibility for raising children who fit into the era's eugenic ideal. Declaring "every schoolyard a training ground for future champions," the ad implies that this "wonderful generation in the making" had potential to succeed because their "intelligent mothers" were intent on maintaining their families' health through hygienic practices.⁴⁶ This focus on sanitation is also symbolic—as Christina Cogdell explains in *Eugenic Design*, the ability to "participate fully in the middle-class culture of cleanliness" (which included the use of personal hygiene products like Lifebuoy soap,

⁴⁴ Scott Nearing and Nellie Nearing, *Woman and Social Progress: A Discussion of the Biologic, Domestic, Industrial, and Social Possibilities of American Women* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1917), 148. See also Marie Carmichael Stopes's 1921 *Radiant Motherhood*, a British guide that was reprinted in the United States. According to Stopes, a scientist and advocate for birth control, mothers played a key role in "the materialization of this ardent dream of a human stock represented only by well-formed, desired, well-endowed, beautiful men and women." Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Radiant Motherhood: A Book for Those Whose Are Creating the Future* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), 244.

⁴⁵ Nearing and Nearing, *Woman and Social Progress*, 148-149.

⁴⁶ Lifebuoy advertisement, 1925, *Ladies' Home Journal*.

access to clean running water, and the ability to afford indoor plumbing) was a way for bourgeois “native-born” white Americans to distinguish themselves from recent immigrant groups, black Americans, and the lower classes.⁴⁷

As scholars who look at consumerism and media have long demonstrated, fostering differentiation in such a manner was (and still is) a key strategy used by advertisers. Writing in her classic 1978 semiotic analysis *Decoding Advertisements*, Judith Williamson observes that “[a]dvertisements must take into account not only the inherent qualities and attributes of the products they are trying to sell, but also the way in which they can make those properties *mean something to us*.”⁴⁸ By drawing upon people’s existing referent systems that are based on shared cultural codes and signs, advertisers are able to accomplish this goal. In crafting imagery and text to create differentiation between a particular branded product and others that are essentially the same, advertisers not only create a distinction between goods, they demarcate dissimilarities between groups of people, as the aforementioned Lifebuoy advertisement demonstrates. As Williamson points out, doing so is a complex process in which consumers both create and are created by the systems of meaning that are present inside advertisements: “We, as people, have thus been made to create the differences between products which then differentiate us.”⁴⁹ In other words, advertisements encourage us align ourselves with (and differentiate ourselves from) others based on what we buy.⁵⁰ Knowing this, it becomes apparent that the systems of meanings at play within this Lifebuoy advertisement connect the product to a specific discursive message that

⁴⁷ Cogdell, *Eugenic Design*, 177-178.

⁴⁸ Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertisements* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978). 12. Emphasis is original.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 46.

attempted to set bourgeois white American mothers apart as superior in terms of their ability to raise worthy children.

In this particular historical context, advertisers drew upon race, gender, and class-based anxieties to foster among Americans a sense of belonging within the period's new urban consumer culture. Described by historian William Leach as an ethos characterized by "acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society," this culture reflected the ideas, values, and attitudes of the society that produced it.⁵¹ In an unprecedented manner, middle-class Americans—driven in part by the newly widespread availability of credit—purchased new items like automobiles, radios, household appliances, and indulged in leisure activities. This newfound consumerism was closely tied to the advertising industry, which became increasingly professionalized and influential during these years. In his landmark monograph on American advertising, Roland Marchand characterizes those who worked in this burgeoning industry as "apostles of modernity," who, like town criers, "brought good news about progress."⁵² Furthermore, the rise of mass circulation print media and radio broadcasting allowed advertisers to reach larger audiences than ever before.

No longer focused primarily on describing the qualities of the products themselves, advertisers now aimed to produce imagery and text that would be easily recognizable and appealing to the consumer's innermost sensibilities. During this period, emphasis was now placed on "creating brand names, logos, package designs...that, below

⁵¹ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 3.

⁵² Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 1.

their literal appearance, tap into unconscious desires, urges, and mythic motifs embedded in the human psyche.”⁵³ According to Marchand, this strategy was quite effective: by the end of the 1920s, advertisements had in effect taught Americans a new kind of “ideogrammatic language” made up of slogans, logos and trademarks that essentially “familiarized people with an entire ‘vocabulary’ of repeated visual motifs and social parables.”⁵⁴ Though he points out that advertising was not a ‘language’ in the traditional sense, it nonetheless served a similar function, giving Americans the means to understand and participate in the era’s broader social and cultural changes. In a period that was characterized by rapid urbanization and industrialization alongside rampant consumerism and fears of race suicide, advertising “established and disseminated a vocabulary of visual images and verbal patterns” that helped Americans “assimilate...into a culture of high technology, complex economic and social relationships, and urbane sophistication.”⁵⁵ From here, it is not difficult to see how positive eugenic ideology (and its attendant links to modernity) fit in to this paradigm. Consider a 1929 advertisement for Horlick’s Malted Milk powder that draws upon the idea of progress by appealing to “modern mothers” (Figure 3). By depicting a happy scene at a newly constructed children’s playroom inside the Illinois Women’s Athletic Club in Chicago, this advertisement idealizes “healthy children of healthy mothers” who had gained strength from consuming a particular branded food product that could be easily purchased in stores throughout the nation.⁵⁶ As well, like much of the period’s advertising, it appeals

⁵³ Ron Beasley and Marcel Danesi, *Persuasive Signs: The Semiotics of Advertising* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), 15.

⁵⁴ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 335.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Horlick’s Malted Milk advertisement, January 1929, *Parents*.

specifically to women, reflecting the notion that consumerism is something that was gendered female.⁵⁷

Drawing from visual semiotic theory as outlined by French philosopher and literary scholar Roland Barthes, we can see that this advertisement contains multiple layers of meaning.⁵⁸ First, the linguistic message is represented in the text that tells us about the merits of this particular product; namely how it is made, and its health benefits that will purportedly allow American children to attain “physical perfection.” Next, the symbolic message can be found in the accompanying photographs: children sitting on the ledge of a swimming pool and a woman about to jump from a diving board signifies strength and good health. Finally, the literal image can be found by looking at the photographs simply as representations of what they are. In this sense, the racial and class elements are so obvious that they almost do not need to be pointed out: all of the children and women portrayed in the advertisement are white, and their ability to participate in activities at an athletic club denote them as middle or upper-middle class.

This particular advertisement is also notable in that it embodies the “nostalgic modernism” that ran through so many of the era’s cultural discourses.⁵⁹ In a paradoxical manner, the ad copy and accompanying imagery celebrates what is “new and most modern” (in this case the athletic club itself, with its state-of-the-art pool, gymnasium,

⁵⁷ Indeed, a 1918 advertisement for the J. Walter Thompson Company (one of the largest and oldest advertising firms in the United States) declares how important it was for companies to target women, since they made “85% of all retail purchases.” “Women in Advertising,” New York: J. Walter Thompson Company, 1918.

⁵⁸ Barthes’s influential 1964 essay “Rhetoric of the Image” has provided scholars with a conceptual framework for studying the relationship between words and images in advertisements and other forms of visual culture. Here I have drawn from the methodology he uses to analyze an advertisement for Panzani brand Italian food products, wherein he identifies three classes of messages (“linguistic,” “symbolic,” and “literal”) that allow advertisements to convey meaning; Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 33-37.

⁵⁹ Lovett, 10. As discussed earlier in this paper, this concept is predicated on using discourses of “modernity” and “newness” to emphasize ideals that were actually very traditional.

and children's playroom, lauded as being one of the first in the United States), but the overall sentiment is very much tied to domestic ideals set out in the nineteenth century by the "Cult of True Womanhood." The two images of women in this advertisement illustrate perfectly these incongruous ideals. A larger photograph portrays women as nurturing, maternal caregivers; conservatively dressed in a sensible blouse, a woman leans in toward four small children, smiling benevolently while offering up glasses of Horlick's Malted Milk. In contrast, a smaller inset photograph of a woman on a diving board personifies the idea of the independent "new woman." Perched up high, her posture is confident as she surveys the scene in front of her. Photographed alone—and wearing a very modern bathing suit—she seems poised to take on a vigorous athletic challenge, which itself is significant as nineteenth century attitudes about women's limited physical capabilities were still very present in the 1920s.⁶⁰

In displaying such contradictory discourses alongside one another, advertisements such as this one can be said to represent a certain ambiguity in the relationship between gender and modernity. Though some overtures were made by advertisers to emphasize the new woman's increasing social and political freedoms, Marchand rightly points out that advertisers' depictions of women's agency in the public sphere was still largely limited to their roles as consumers and managers of households.⁶¹ According to him, whatever range of activities a woman might enjoy in the public sphere (such as swimming laps at an athletic club), she "still bore full responsibility for maintaining the

⁶⁰ A thorough discussion of the historical stereotypes and attitudes surrounding women's athletic abilities in the United States can be found in Patricia Vertinsky, "Exercise, Physical Capability and the Eternally Wounded Woman in Late Nineteenth Century North America," *Journal of Sport History* 14, no. 1 (May 1987): 7-28.

⁶¹ As an example of this, he cites a 1920s ad that featured an archetypical new woman carefully deliberating on her vote—for a particular brand of toothpaste. Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 186.

‘saving atmosphere’ of the home.”⁶² As the Horlick’s ad demonstrates, it was even possible to extend the reach of the home outwards—a woman was also expected to provide care and nurture in public spaces, in this case the club’s children’s playroom. In providing their targeted female audiences with such a limited vision of modernity, advertisers reflected the notion that Americans could “attain every promise of the new while sacrificing nothing worthwhile of the old.”⁶³ A woman could (and should) consume new products and become open to modern ideas, but only so far as they would help her fulfill her prescribed role as wife and mother.

These gendered discourses of modernity were closely linked to the eugenics movement, as positive eugenic thought reflected many of these same inconsistencies. As an example of how these attitudes coexisted, consider how motherhood became professionalized during this period. Developments in science, medicine, technology, education, and culture meant that women were encouraged to look beyond their own instincts and guidance from friends and family and toward dictates set out by credentialed experts like physicians and psychologists.⁶⁴ Though prescriptive literature produced by eugenicist organizations like the Children’s Bureau and the American Eugenics Society provided mothers with advice on childrearing given by medical professionals, advertising also drew from this new scientific motherhood. For instance, consider the aforementioned series of Lifebuoy soap advertisements narrated by a “health doctor,” or a 1928 advertising cookbook published by the Ralston-Purina Company that contained information about child development (including growth charts that detailed ideal height

⁶² Ibid., 186.

⁶³ Ibid., 188.

⁶⁴ Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 7.

and weight guidelines) alongside recipes and promotional copy (Figure 4).⁶⁵ In giving guidance to women about how to raise children according to modern methods, these experts contributed to the pronatalist discourse that was a cornerstone of positive eugenics in the United States. If bourgeois women would follow the guidelines set out for them by scientific motherhood (whether from an educational pamphlet produced by a government-funded organization or an advertisement found in a popular magazine), they would be able to produce the “better babies” and “fitter families” that were seen as necessary for the country’s survival.

By exploring the processes in which these ideas permeated American society, I have tried to highlight the growing influence of advertising in both reflecting and shaping broader cultural attitudes and values. In an era characterized by so much unease related to changing gender roles, race, and class tensions, positive eugenics seemed to offer a solution to the problems that consumed many Americans’ thoughts. Inextricably linked to domesticity and motherhood, women played a pivotal role in this ideology. As 1916’s *The Child Welfare Manual* proclaimed, “[t]he greatest contribution that any woman can make to civilization is to help found a successful home.”⁶⁶ Echoing this, historian Kline remarked in 2001 that “the mother of tomorrow” would prevent the destruction of American civilization in two key ways: firstly, her refusal to abandon nineteenth century domestic ideology would allow her to “restore the moral forces necessary to keep the American family intact, as well as reaffirm male dominance in the public sphere.”

⁶⁵ “A Mother’s Manual,” (St. Louis: Ralston Purina Company, 1928), 10-11.

⁶⁶ Agnes Edwards Rothery, “Functions of Motherhood,” in *The Child Welfare Manual: A Handbook of Child Nature and Nurture for Parents and Teachers* (New York: The University Society, 1916), 14.

Secondly, her choice to procreate “would ensure that the white race would maintain its dominance.”⁶⁷

Given this centrality of women within eugenic thought, it is perhaps predictable that advertisers picked up on the pronatalist rhetoric espoused by political leaders and the scientific community. After all, women were also the target audience of advertisers working within the country’s new mass consumer culture. But what is especially remarkable is the juxtaposition between discourses of modernity and older ideals in many of these advertisements. Reflective of broader concerns in a United States that was extraordinarily concerned with its position in a rapidly changing world, these conflicting representations of women’s roles signify an underlying tension that still remains so much a part of American life: the desire for newness is coupled with a sense of anxiety and doubt about the consequences. As the era’s positive eugenic ideology indicates—whether expressed through advertising, scientific texts, or prescriptive literature—loyalties were very much divided between America’s mythological rural past and urban industrialized present. In such a tumultuous age, these advertisements are characteristic of a country that was no longer entirely sure of itself or where it was going. The reactions to widespread change, embodied in this important new medium, reflect a dichotomy in American culture that still exists: every step forward is accompanied by a calculated look back at the past.

⁶⁷ Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 17.

Appendix

The finest thing in the world a happy *healthy* family

A Health Beauty Talk by the Health Doctor

I SIMPLY cannot find the words to express the emotions aroused by this lovely picture. The original painting is before me as I write—I wish it could hang in every American home. So I am going to be intensely practical instead.

It was meant that everyone should be well. Sickness is unnatural—and to a large degree preventable.

I think all the great doctors and health commissioners would approve the following statement:

There would be little sickness in a perfectly clean world.

We mothers can't avoid all the danger. We can't wash other people's children. We can't prevent "carriers" of disease germs from depositing bacteria on the things our children and husbands constantly touch—money, books, telephones, car straps, door knobs, etc. But we

can see to it that our loved ones constantly purify hands and faces with Lifebuoy Health Soap and millions of mothers do just that.

Because we know that Lifebuoy removes germs from the skin. We know that ever since Lifebuoy entered our homes we have had fewer colds—we have been saved from the midnight terror of sudden fevers.

Only healthy skin is beautiful

And more than that, our skins have been softer and finer textured. The little ones have not developed ugly rashes or pimples. And our own mirrors reveal that lovely underglow which is the secret of a radiant complexion.

I know Lifebuoy to be as fine and pure as any soap ever sold at any price. I firmly believe that it is the surest everyday protection that any family can have against the danger in dirt.

It agrees with your skin.

The Health Doctor

Every Mother is a Health Doctor

America is the healthiest country in the world—and Americans are the best-looking people because twenty million mothers are protecting family health by sifting dirt.

Send 10 Cents for My book "Health Beauty"

I am sure that it will be a real help to you in protecting the health and beauty of yourself and your children. It is charmingly illustrated in color and bound in stiff covers—a regular library book. It will be mailed to you if you will send 10 cents to Lever Bros. Co., Cambridge, Mass.

Water Softens

The wholesome odor vanishes but the protection remains

Figure 1: This 1924 advertisement for Lifebuoy soap celebrates the eugenic ideal and emphasizes the role mothers were to play in ensuring that the United States remained the “healthiest” and “best-looking” nation.



Why America wins Olympics

WHAT a wonderful generation is in the making—every school yard a training ground for future champions—thousands of summer camps and beaches pouring vitality into splendid little bodies.

And what is still greater—in millions of American homes, intelligent mothers are enforcing the first law of health—cleanliness.

Because mothers know that Lifebuoy offers a definite protection to child health, it has become the most widely used toilet soap in the world.

It's a treat to try Lifebuoy for the first time—the lather is so creamy—so pure—so invigorating. You feel cleaner than ever before—because you are cleaner. Your skin afterwards is so soft, smooth and rosy. You'll love it for shampooing, especially for "bobs." After a Lifebuoy bath your whole body is deodorized, toned up and vigorously alive.

But Lifebuoy's greatest health value is that it gently removes germs from hands and face—the dangerous germs you pick up from almost everything you touch—the germs of street dust, stuffy cars, theatres and schools.

Lifebuoy purifies the skin—and only healthy skin is beautiful. My illustrated book, "Health Beauty," will be sent for 10 cents. Lever Bros. Co., 49 Barleigh Street, Cambridge, Mass.

The Health Doctor

ORANGE-RED Lifebuoy is the color of pure palm-fruit oil. You will like the sleet, quickly vanishing odor because you like cleanliness.





MRS. HARRY E. SPARLING
St. Louis, Mo., writes:

"After seeing the wonderful effect Lifebuoy had on my skin, I began using it for the baby's bath also. We also use it as a shampoo. It beautifies the hair leaving it soft, abundant and wavy."

Figure 2: Part of the same advertising campaign, this 1925 advertisement for Lifebuoy soap underscores nationalist ideals while emphasizing the importance of hygiene in childrearing.



In this lovely pool under the sky, children of members of the Illinois Women's Athletic Club have learned an swimming. Part of their program of physical perfection is "Horlick's" served in the children's playroom.

Children of Modern Mothers

In the children's playroom of the Illinois Women's Athletic Club, Chicago, "Horlick's" is a daily treat

NEW...modern! A turquoise pool poised 17 stories in the air...A finely equipped gymnasium...bowling alleys...practice golf greens...All for women exclusively!

And, newest and most modern of all, a playroom for children, where mothers may leave their children in competent hands, while they dive and putt and conduct committee business.

Healthy children of healthy mothers. It is natural that here, where mothers and children alike enjoy the best, one should find Horlick's Malted Milk.

The same pure, safe nourishment that you can offer your children!

What "Horlick's" gives
"Horlick's" contains all the body-building qualities of fresh, full-cream cow's milk, plus that



Horlick's the original Malted Milk, is sold in both natural and chocolate flavors, in powder or liquid form.

of malted grains. Carbohydrates, proteins, minerals, vitamins—all conserved by the exclusive Horlick process.

The action of the malt enzymes makes these food elements so digestible that they are assimilated almost at once.

It is easy to see why "Horlick's" is so good for your children! Why drinks of "Horlick's," warm or cold, will give them energy for all day!

If they are underweight

If your children are nervous, lacking in appetite, give them "Horlick's" (natural or chocolate flavor) to build them up.

Energy, sound sleep, keen appetites usually return when underweight is corrected.

Do not confuse

But do not confuse "Horlick's" with imitations which have appeared on the market. Only "Horlick's" is the original malted milk—used and endorsed by physicians and hospitals for nearly 50 years.

"Horlick's" is made under sanitary conditions. The milk



Housed in its own recreation story building on Chicago's exclusive lower North Side, this Club is one of the show places of the city. Above, the pool, with its famous murals.

is from Horlick's own herds, or from herds under Horlick inspection. The choice grains are malted in Horlick's own malt house. Every care you would take to protect your children, Horlick has taken.

Why not start your children now on "Horlick's"? Let us send you a generous sample—free. Your choice of flavors, natural or chocolate. Just clip the coupon and mail it. Or, go

The Illinois Women's Athletic Club was one of the first in the country to establish a children's playroom. Here, busy little architects in sand, tennis-olier champions drop their work for the morning ration of Horlick's Malted Milk.

to the dealer and buy a package today. Insist on "Horlick's," the original and genuine.

A nourishing, delicious table drink for adults. Induces sound sleep if taken—preferably hot—before retiring. An ideal food beverage for invalids, convalescents, nursing mothers, the aged and infirm.

FREE TRIAL PACKAGE

HORLICK'S MALTED MILK CO., Dept. E-17, Racine, Wis. Tear out and mail this coupon for sample package. Check flavor wanted. For Speedy Mailer, the improved method of mixing a creamy Malted Milk in a pitcher or glass, enclose 4 cents in stamps for postage.



☐ Natural ☐ Chocolate

Name _____

Address _____

(If you live in Canada, address 2105 Pine IX Ave., Montreal)

THE ORIGINAL  MALTED MILK
HORLICK'S

All advertisements conform to standards on page 73. 5

Figure 3: By including two opposing representations of women, this 1929 advertisement for Horlick's Malted Milk Powder reflects the nostalgic modernism that characterized both positive eugenic ideology and the period's consumer culture.

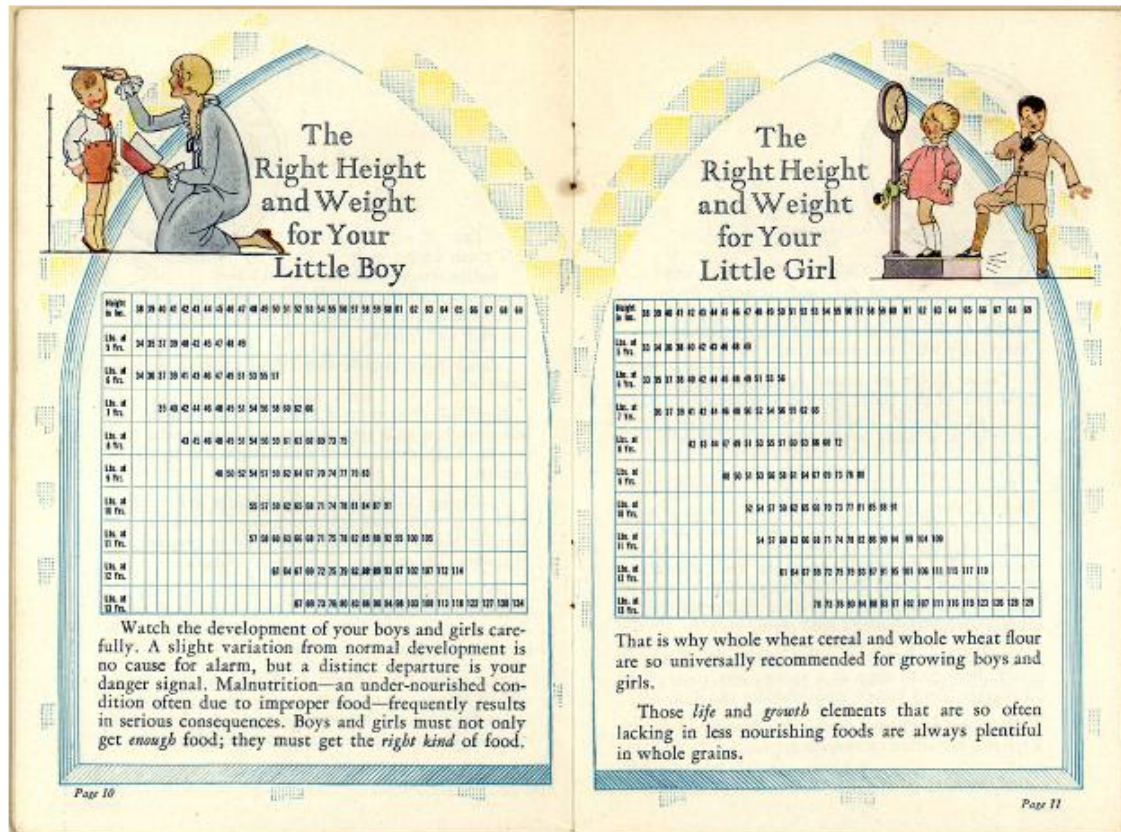


Figure 4: A chart detailing ideal heights and weights for children inside a 1928 advertising cookbook published by the Ralston Purina Company.

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